

## Sonnet XLIII

### *Glossary*

Being	Existence (given by God)
Ideal Grace	Freely given favour of God
strive	Make every effort to achieve
Right	Decency, virtue, righteousness
Praise	Commendation, exaltation, admiration
Saints	Admirable religious role models

### *Summary*

This sonnet is an effort by the speaker to put into words the depth of her love for her fiancé. She works to use words and images to try and explain her passion and utter devotion to her soon-to-be-husband. It is considered to be one of the most romantic poems ever written in the English Language. It is admirable because of the contradiction between form and content. The rigid form with its restrictions and set conventions seem completely at odds with the overflowing of her emotions and the strength of her passion.

### *Discussion*

The sonnet begins with of the most famous lines in poetry, especially for love poetry: "How do I love you? Let me count the ways!" It is a rhetorical question. The speaker speedily supplies the reply and it is given with confidence and great

enthusiasm. The tone is jubilant and eager and the entire sonnet flows with passion and earnestness. The persona's delight in her fiancé is obvious and cannot be contained. We know that Barrett Browning was married shortly after composing this sonnet and it seems she is excited and very happy about her imminent vows.

She then proceeds to list the extent of her love – or at least she attempts to use language to describe the emotions she feels for her lover. She constantly repeats "I love thee". This use of anaphora not only emphasises the certainty of her feelings, but also gathers force as the sonnet progresses. It helps build to the climactic second last line.

She begins with a mathematical, logical approach, covering the dimensions of her love. She begins with the conceptually simple "length & breadth & height" but she couples this with a spiritual concept by quantifying her love to the extent her "soul can reach, when feeling out of sight / For the ends of Being and Ideal Grace". Some see she is saying here she loves him as much as humanly possible. She seems to apply infinite dimensions as she uses a religious metaphor: the extent of love being like reaching for faith ("Being and Ideal Grace"). This line hints at death and judgement but she uses it to symbolise her love as eternal reaching for all that is good, righteous and pure. She parallels her love of God with her love of her fiancé.

Yet while she loves him on this higher plane, she also loves him at an ordinary level – "I love thee to the level of everyday's / Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight". The term, "quiet need" has connotations of gentleness and it seems her love supplies her with the sustenance, night and day. This love is a basic need just like food, water or shelter.

It is the "most quiet need" as, unlike going without food, shelter or water, the negative results are less obvious. Yet the image implies life is not really alive as it is incomplete and purposeless. It is also important that she refers to the darkness here. You might see that in Sonnet XXXII she awaited night as a time to hide from love and its implications yet now her love nourishes her through this period. The definite statement gives this declaration power. There is no uncertainty present.

She then lists other ways she loves him. The following three lines use repetition to magnify the extent of her love. "I love thee freely" works on two levels. She can mean "freely" as in of her own free-will. Like men who strive for the world to be just and morally right, her love also follows this. Such a love is necessary for her happiness and sense of well-being. Yet she also means "freely" as in without restraint. She cannot contain her passionate emotions. Comparing this with "as men strive for Right" inundates the love with high morality. She borrows the pure motives of righteousness and decency to imply the virtues of her love. It too is right and honourable.

She also pledges that her love is pure, as men "turn from Praise". Great men do not do good things to be praised or congratulated. Good, pure men do things because they are right and correct. She likens her love to this sort of purity. Hers is not a selfish love.

She also loves him with passion that was once negative as she dwelled on her "old griefs" or less mature from her childhood. Now her emotional energy is channelled into loving him positively. The ellipsis here shows a pause which emphasises how much love has changed her life and her emotional maturity. She also speaks of loving him with "the love I seemed to lose / With my lost saints" which refers

again to her past disillusionment, innocence and ignorance. The alliteration of the 'l' in this line is aurally effective and the gentle lulling sound emphasises her quiet contentment and her calm confidence.

The line, "I love thee with the breath, / Smiles, tears, of all my life" works as a climax. She intensifies it by using the extreme, "all my life", emphasising the boundless love she feels with the exclamation mark. Here she summates her life to its physiological (breath) and emotional basics – happiness (smiles) and sadness (tears). The persona loves him with the entirety of her being.

In the final lines she takes us back to the religious images and makes it clear that her faith underpins this love. She exists at the whim of God and, if possible, she will love him for eternity. The notion that she will "love thee better" is meant to expand the infinite amount of love even more and refers to her acceptance of the Christian notion of Heaven and its perfection. She can love him even better in the after-life. It is a demure, modest resolution that reinforces the purity of the love she describes.

## *Ideas*

### *The power and intensity of love*

The idea that love has transformed her life is again present in this sonnet. The persona makes it clear that her past life was one with grief that she felt intensely. Love also seems to have matured the speaker as she speaks of her "childhood's faith". Love has nourished her so that it is as much a basic need as any other. It is so powerful that she requires it all the time, "by sun & candlelight".

She also compares the depth of her love to the same moral tenants that govern and motivate mankind. The goodness of men as they "strive for Right" and "turn from Praise" is reflected in the love and its power to guide her. It is a soul-deep love that sustains and makes her complete. The patriarchal society she lives in is reflected in the images she chooses. She purposely chooses to liken the depth of her love to the actions and motivations of men. She perceives these masculine images as the strongest. The power men is being used to lend her feelings power.

She presents the love she feels as spiritual, like the reaching of faith and the contemplation of God. Paralleling her love to the profundity she feels for her faith is used to both emphasise the power of love and its intensity. She loves him with her whole being- "with the breath, / Smiles, tears, of all my life!"

Yet she sees that love is a construct of her Lord and in this way chooses a modest end. She will love him forever, "if God choose" in her eternal life to come.

### *The nature of ideal love*

This sonnet again presents the couple's love as ideal. It is the power and intensity that recommends it. She does not feel any superficial sort of infatuation. Instead she goes to great pains to present the love as spiritual and all-encompassing. She likens it to her faith and speaks of it as "everyday's most quiet need".

### *The necessity of love for fulfilment*

The sonnet implies that without this love she is unfulfilled. It may be the "most quiet need" which tells that it is more subtle than the need for perhaps food or water, but it is a powerful need as reflected in the imagery as discussed. Without love, her past life seems full of "griefs" that were clearly terrible as she felt them intensely like the love she feels now.

The sonnet suggests love has facilitated her maturity and development to an adult who is confident and complete. The tone is certain and the poem exudes confidence and contentment, especially in the final three lines. These are both triumphant as well as modest. Barrett Browning seems to have found a balance just like the use of the constrained sonnet to give an outpouring of emotion.

### *Mortality*

Barrett Browning presents her pure love as enduring beyond the grave. Her human mortality does not interfere with this. There is also the sense that love, after human life, will be even more profound. Clearly this reflects her religious beliefs. She is borrowing notions of Heaven and applying it to the strength and perfection of her love after the grave.

## **Sonnet XLIII - Questions**

1. Summarise this poem in FIVE points.
2. a. Describe the tone of the sonnet.  
  
b. Discuss how this tone is important to the sonnet's ideas.
3. a. Examine the structure of the sonnet. Summarise its features (ie. rhyme scheme, line stresses, line syllables, idea development)  
  
b. How tightly is it organised?
4. Explain how repetition has been used to make the sonnet more effective in representing its ideas.
5. a. Explain how the poet creates an atmosphere of calm confidence. You need to discuss tone and other aural devices like alliteration and assonance.  
  
b. How does this atmosphere reiterate the notion of love as the "most quiet need"?
6. Imagine you are Elizabeth Barrett Browning, try and write the feelings you convey in this sonnet in prose. Write no more than 200 words but ensure you use some comparisons to try and explain yourself. Try not to reuse too many actual phrases from the sonnet.